

A Short Fiction Collection

By

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Kalen Richardson

Submitted to the graduate degree program in English and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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A Short Story Collection

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Date approved: 4/17/13

Abstract:

The following is a collection of Short Stories and Flash Fiction told in both the first and second person, and in both a young adult and adult narrative voice. Women's experience, childhood disillusion, and human disconnection, especially amidst families, are all thematically present.

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## The End of Something

We all split when Rome came. It took the others a little longer but it took me no time at all. Rome was the new manager—self-proclaimed. Like the city, she said. She came in on a weekday through the backdoor with her long skirt and loud clogs. She came in through the backdoor with her large breasts brushing the back of us; she said, “behind you, hot plates,” she said, “corner,” “sharp knife.” She came in with her revised cleaning list, her lamination, her habit of eating sausage only and reading romance novels standing up when we were slow. I said farewell to Uvaldo in my best bad Spanish. I knew how to tell him not to put a Jalapeno in my pancake please, and I knew how to tell him hello and goodbye. Except I actually said, see you tomorrow. I threw my apron, never washed, in the corner of the coatroom. I clocked out forever and took a coffee to go.

## Risk

A man at the counter of the electronics department reminds me of what risk is: “It seems all good now, you know, but say you spill your orange juice.”

The insurance would cost as much as the purchase, and so I vow to myself: no more orange juice.

## Baby

I have a baby in my arms that I didn't birth but people on the street are saying, "he's got your eyes," and so I don't correct them. It is a he. He has delicate eyes, though, and thick lashes, and was wrapped in yellow when I found him and so I wasn't sure. I checked.

With a baby in your arms, everything is dangerous: cars roll slowly through their stops without stopping, turn right on red lights without really looking—they look but don't *see* us; twigs and acorns fall from the sky; the unevenness of sidewalks. I hug him close to my body; shield his eyes with my hand. The curves of me were meant for a baby.

I almost gave myself away at the post office. I went to find out what city we were in and a dykey post-office lady behind the counter said, "and what is your baby's name." I could have made something up, of course, but I got caught up in the wondering. And I don't know why I said it, it spilled out of me like blood; I said, "He hasn't told me yet." And her eyes sort of changed, and so I laughed, and so did she.

## A Wedding Toast

On an afternoon in June before either of us knew what a decade felt like we had a wedding in her bedroom for my rabbit and her bear. There is nothing, sometimes, on a hot Kansas day than to stay inside and to marry someone. We made a dress for the rabbit, which was longer and more complicated than the dress she wore every day. We sang what we knew of dun-dun-dun-dun, which was only just that, while we walked them down her carpet. And we left them alone after in her bedroom for something we knew was private, and necessary, and painful.

It's not that they are allowed to kiss each other but that he may kiss her. And she is making promises that don't sound to me like things she should promise. Our mothers said when we were babies we laid curled up together, like cats. We grew older and we laid knees touching under covers. We held hands at night like sisters would do. Our parents turned off our lights and told us to sleep. They were strange to us, foreign, something we knew we were never going to be. We promised this to each other. And we whispered everything else we thought of out loud just to keep each other awake, until the sun rose, sometimes.

Sarah's mother says, and my mother nods, that egg yolk all over everything is a sign of bad breeding, Me, I wipe my fingers off on my napkin. I sit up a little straighter. But Sarah, she looks at each of us, licks each finger slowly, and keeps dipping her toast in bright yellow yolk. She bursts the middle of her next egg open. It's brunch after church. It's a Sunday in grade school. We looked eyes down to pray. Sarah was the only one in Sunday school with a question about forever.



But “Mrs. His-Last-Name-Instead-of-her-Father’s” she writes later, in a notebook, where no one can see it but me. When we graduated from high school we drove to the beach without money because we hadn’t seen the ocean. We drove through cities overnight and talked the whole time so we wouldn’t fall asleep.

And all of these people are sitting here now, watching her be her father’s until he gives her away. They are saying one memory they have of her as if she is dying. “I remember when,” they say; “back in college,” they say. I say something too:

He asked, and you said yes, and you cried and now people have bought you towels and cookware that is better than the stuff you and I had in college like this is all you will need. You hired someone to take pictures because they’ll be things you will miss. You picked out flowers with your mother and it was timed right by someone to make sure they’d be alive.

## Vincent

Vincent said my town is enchanted. He lived thirty miles away in rundown city, and he said he had driven here more than once in the rain and the rain had let up just a mile outside. I met him one summer night locked out of my apartment. I had just moved to a top floor and there was a different key for the bottom and the top—and I, somehow, had the top but not the bottom.

I got a beer from the bar and sat down outside beside a man who looked 400 lbs. and asleep. We were under a roof of beer and smoke and sweat, everyone crammed in on the wooden back porch. He woke up when he sensed me there. I could smell him and everything he had eaten that day. It took him a moment to orient himself, remember where he was; I could see from my peripheral.

I knew what he meant: all the white people, all the money, the concentrated young.

He said it's happened the opposite way, too. Just a mile outside of my town on his way home it has started to rain.

He had been sitting all alone on the bench and took up most of it. His head was so much higher than mine just from sitting on fat, not because he was taller. He lit a cigarette and looked down at me from the corner of his eye. The rest of the patio was filled with couples, nestling—people who had places besides their own homes to go, people who were living with their significant others, or roommates, people with spare keys.

“I'm Vincent,” he said.

“Nice to meet you.”

“I’m sort of going through a crisis,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“I just,” he said, “I can’t stand people who say they’re your friends, but actually pity you.” He said pity pushing out the ‘p’ in disgust.

We sat in silence for a while.

“It’s nice to talk to strangers sometimes, you know? Someone who’s not pretending to be your friend,” he said.

I didn’t know what to say. I just held my beer and I sipped. I wondered how I would get into my apartment.

“I know it’s all connected,” he said, “Zen and all that. I’m not an angry person. It’s just, I get so mad sometimes.”

As the back porch began to clear, as he exhaled smoke away from me, thoughtfully, it got a bit colder and I hugged my arms around myself, then stopped, hoping he wouldn’t offer me his jacket.

He said, “Thank god all the couples are gone.”

I agreed that it had been making it awkward.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he said, “I’m happy for them and all, it’s just, no one wants to be around that.”

“No,” I said, “right.”

Vincent lit new cigarettes with old ones. I thought a few times about telling him I was meeting someone, or had somewhere to be, but I didn’t. It was a stone wall, where I lived, straight up, and there was no way I could climb it, although later someone who loved me would. It was too late to call my landlord, and I didn’t have his number. I held

onto the glass long after the drink was gone. I had a habit of this.

“Wow,” he said, “This has been really nice.”

He had armpit sweat showing, and food or spit or both collecting in the corners of his mouth. His T-shirt was tucked in sweat pants and his belly was far out in front of us. He had grown quiet. I looked up expecting him to have fallen back asleep, but something different happened. The purest heat in the world, the reason it's good to be human, came out from him. He took my hand and held it, and I let him. No one else was around to see. The warmth of his large palms and fat fingers went through the whole front side of my body and made me shudder.

## Stories of Franco

We sat in the smoking section and did impressions of Martha, the prep cook. Prep cook meant she mixed power with water and stirred it hard—her arm fat flapping—until it looked like mashed potatoes. Her hair was gray and her back was hunched and her face was wrinkled and her expression was hard. It was our worst fear to become her, which is why we spoke in her voice and waddled her walk.

It was a buffet and steak house. The booths and the carpets were red and black, and smoking was still inside. I didn't smoke. I still thought smoking was gross before I didn't anymore before I did again. I was fifteen and then sixteen. It was on the outer edge of town on the outer edge of Kansas and our owner, Todd, drank. And he yelled. And then he drank more and then said sorry and he appreciates all of our work. Everyone drank; Franco leaned over the grill, sweating, and put whiskey in his coke. The rest of us snuck back to the freezer to take a shot of Todd's vodka whenever we wanted. He would hide it somewhere and claim we were stealing it whether we did or not, which was why we always did.

The restaurant was slow most of the time. The people who ate there were old. They ate the lunch buffet at a discounted price at 10:45 in the morning, or they were Rubbermaid workers—the only factory in town. The fry cooks played drinking games. The dishwasher leaked and so we were always stepping in inches of water. I had nothing to do with my money back then except keep it hidden in my room and count it sometimes. My parents had said to get to job, so to build character and so to not be a pothead like my brother. Sometimes I gave my money to Niki or Monica, our two managers, for one of them to buy me beer. Our town was a dry town, a Methodist town,

but we would all drive together to the next town over, and if that closed too soon we'd drive to the town the other way. They always did it for me because they were getting fatter and older and didn't want to be liked less than the other one.

Todd hired mostly kids like us—young with no standards. I was a “block girl” because I was the youngest and couldn't waitress yet. Block girl meant I stood behind the order-counter and took people's orders. It meant I gave them their red plastic tray so they could pile on their salad and breadsticks from the bar. I gave them their sodas. I scrubbed the thick black stuff off of the bottom of the cooking stations when no one could see me, and gently wiped down counters when people could see. I wrote down orders on the ticket book and slid it to the cooks. At night, I stirred the old macaroni in the new macaroni, the new green beans in the old green beans. I covered all of it in saran wrap on big plastic carts and pushed it all into the freezer for the morning.

His name was Mike Franco but we called him Franco because he was different than us—he was older, and he was sad—and because he looked like a Franco. And so we would slide the sliding foe-wood meant to block off big parties, which we never really had, in order to block ourselves, and our smoke, and our words, which were hateful after or during or before our shifts, which were long. Todd would say, “If you shitheads are all going to break together, could you not let the customers see?” And we would say, “Yes sir Todd sir,” everyone except for me: because I was the youngest I kept my mouth shut.

I fell in love with someone that year at the restaurant. I never talked to him except to ask if an order was ready or almost ready or how long it would be, but I stayed awake at night thinking of ways to say more. He would say, “Comin' up quick” or “two minutes” and I would say, “cool” or “no hurry” or “okay.” His name was AJ and he was

older than me because everyone was older than me, and he was a grill cook but not the type that was going to be there forever. In fact one day he left. On a day before he left I walked into the freezer and he and Molly were kissing and so I let the door shut without getting the big jug of ketchup that I needed. She was the other block girl. They didn't even stop kissing to see me.

"What do you want with that guy anyways?" Franco said, later—my heart still throbbing in my throat.

"Who?" I said.

Franco said, "You shouldn't let this place in your skin."

And instead of wondering what I wanted with AJ, or what it meant to let a place in my skin, I wondered how Franco knew. I began telling the stories of Franco.

There was a rumor that Franco let his grass grow so tall that he had to drive over his yard with his little geo-metro and hope it died on its own.

Every once in a while Friday nights would get busy. If there was a high school football game, families came in to load up on all-you-can-eat food and Philly-cheese steak sandwiches. It was one of these nights that Franco, who was just a few feet from me, throwing chopped-up steak and peppers and onions on the grill, started to dance on his tiptoes. And then he fell, hard because he's tall. I said his name right before he fell. I said, "Franco. Mike!" I said his name and then yelled it and then yelled to everyone, "Someone get a phone? Someone call an ambulance?" But Molly said it again, calmly, and that brought Todd to the phone, saying the restaurant's name, leaning down to check

his breath, and saying, “Yes, breathing.” They were all moving and speaking easily, it seemed. It seemed like Franco to them was just a man who collapsed instead of someone they knew.

I later learned the ambulance ride cost Franco \$500—an amount I knew he didn’t have because I knew his lights in his house went out sometimes because he told me so once. The doctors said his hemoglobin was on the very low side of normal. They said his blood pressure was dangerously low. Franco was so big and so dehydrated that they gave him three IVs. These were all just rumors.

With a case of beer between us one night after work, we all got quiet all at once. Franco hadn’t come back yet. We didn’t know what he was doing or how he was paying his bills or mowing his lawn. We were on the back porch and could only stay around for as long as Todd didn’t drive by, like he liked to do some nights, looking for a reason to get mad. Someone said Franco was in the hospital for his liver, which wasn’t working right in some way.

On my next day off, without knowing why, I rode my bike to visit him in the hospital.

“Typical me,” he said, “The whites of my eyes are yellow and I didn’t even know.”

I said, “It’s ok.” I said, “We’re not looking at our own eyes.” I didn’t know what to say. So then I said nothing. And then I left.



I turned sixteen that summer, just able to drive but with no car yet—that would take another summer of serving, and another fall of begging, and then a little bit of debt. I rode my bike down Franco's street and stopped just before his house. I had made it my quest to find out where he lived and see about his grass. He was reading on his porch. His lawn was overgrown but not by a lot. Then he was just sitting with eyes closed. I watched him from where he couldn't see me for what seemed like a long time. And then I saw him reach down to the porch floor beside him to pick up something that wasn't there. He reached from habit and found nothing; he leaned back in his chair. The restaurant closed later that summer. I rode my bike to work one day and there was a sign in the window that said there would be no new schedule. It said, "Thank you" and it said "Management," even though there was only one person who could write it. There was nothing to warn us that it would close, it just closed. And the next time I saw the inside, years later, it was vacant, dusty, already something else.

## Lipstick

My mom says all men will cheat on you if you let them. She says it's nothing to cry about. She says to find one who's too busy or who's god-fearing or gay. She makes me stand in the kitchen and talk to her while she re-labels spices. Everything has been relabeled since my father has left. I tell her about Christopher who loves Sara and who knows I love him. I tell her about how they hold hands. I tell her about how Sara smiles at me and I smile back even though I hate her. She is sitting on the pantry floor with a glass of wine beside her. It's a few days after I turned nine. It's the year I got a Bart Simpson birthday cake and the year my dad left. Now it is only half of him, too many pieces cut of it, uneaten, lying in the paper cake box, growing stale around the edges.

My dad took me to breakfast before he left forever. We went to a place we went a lot where there are two-dollar hamburgers and a waitress who is pregnant. Everyone else in there is sitting alone and reading a newspaper and in overalls and a man. My dad leaned forward on his elbows and told me that God doesn't care what we wear or where we are on Sundays at noon. My mom was at church with my aunts and my cousins. He stared at me, and then back down at that oily sheet of paper underneath his French fries.

"There comes a time when you have to think about yourself again," he said.

"Can I come with you?" I said, but I never told anyone I asked this, not when I saw how much my mom cried and heard people say how terrible he was to leave. Not after he said no.

When my mom leaves me at home now, alone, she tucks my hair behind my ears and says that I'll be just fine on my own. My mom is tall and blonde and men we don't know are always talking to her in department store lines, always opening car doors for

both of us in the parking lot at Wal Mart. They take things from her hands. They say, “Let me.” They say, “You look like your mother,” but they’re looking at her and not me when they say it. And when those men walk away and I say that whatever it was wasn’t even heavy, look up at her confused, she whispers to me that men like to feel useful. And to learn this. And to let them.

My grandma lives in a town in Western Kansas where you can lean your whole body into the Western Kansas wind. But then you have nothing else to do. Both my grandma and my mom put back on lipstick right after they eat. They always do this even when it’s snowing outside and they’re not going anywhere—even though my grandpa has died and my dad has left and it’s just us women.

My grandma says I’m pretty but with my teeth fixed I’ll be perfect. She says in the meantime sit up straight and for God’s sake ee-nun-cee-ate. Her hand is on the middle of my back, which means to make myself taller.

Before he left, my dad woke me up in the mornings. He would turn on my lights and turn off my fan and I couldn’t fall back to sleep in the loud silence and the bright light. Now my mom wakes me up by yelling from the bottom of the stairs. I bury my head down deep in my covers and she finds my forehead and kisses it before leaving for work. I’m late for school sometimes because I turn my light back off and my fan is still on and I fall back asleep.

After my dad left, my mom started making me water plants in our yard. She says to say the alphabet at every section of the garden. We live in the smallest house on a block of big Victorian houses, but after he left our yard started to look the most perfect. Sometimes I do it right and say the whole alphabet fifteen times.

My mom says to hand her a beer and to open it for her. My mom's nails are wet and red like the door to our house that my dad built but is hers.

After groceries we take the long way home. She drives through the rich neighborhood slowly and asks me which house I'd pick if I could pick any of them. *When* you can pick any of them, she says. I know there's a right answer by now so I take my time and point to one that's stone with a red door and she nods.

After awhile the sun goes down and it's late but it's summer so it's still warm and the windows are down and my mom's smoking cigarettes. She turns the radio on. I turn on the dome light and reach in her purse and take out her lipstick. I'll put it on just like she does and kiss my hand after like she does. I pull down the mirror in front of me and look at myself with my pale, bare lips. I know by now it's the most important thing to wear. I know it's the only thing that makes your eyes shine.

## Suicide

If I tell it again it'll be that he was my boyfriend and I was never the same, or maybe that his dad caught him with another boy. His dad was an asshole, and he was quiet and lonely, so the story would work. But that wasn't how it was.

"That's not much of a story," she said. And I said, "that's because it is true, that's because that's all I knew of it. "

She was obsessed with suicide like we were sixteen again. Not her own, but other's. She and I were living together; I had just been reminded that having your heart broken could be physical. Your whole body could get heavy; your actual chest could actually hurt. The last time I had felt like this my dad had put me to work on the farm, made me lift heavy things. It had helped. He had said real work cures. He had said time heals. He had said it would get better but then there'd be worse but then it'd get better again.

She wasn't interested in the well-designed, well-executed ones, the clean shots through the head after they'd lost all their money, but more in the sloppy ones, the confused ones, the unexplainable ones, the ones who might've changed their minds, the people who might've gotten so high right before it was over that they grew that glow inside them that said everything would be alright—she'd been there, she said, with that glow, she'd been both places, she said, that high and that low—and by the time they got to that happiness, she said, it might have been too late. She read all about them in newspapers, in literature, fiction and nonfiction, real and unreal—because it's all real, no

matter where it's written. People don't write things from thin air. I was the one who told her that. We were at an upper-middle class, white school and I was studying writing.

She told me about the phenomena where there are multiple suicides in one town in one season—a ripple effect, for no apparent reason. She told me about one of these cases in Canada. She said there were similarities in all of them: they were all between the ages of fourteen and twenty, they were all people who no one would suspect, they all hung themselves, and they left no notes. It was like a cult except they didn't seem to know each other. She researched how often this happened. She looked up theories on why. She talked about the first ones, the ancient ones—indigenous people going off somewhere to die so that they were no longer a burden on the group. She talked about animal ones, when animals do something we designate it *natural*, she pointed out, like when we discovered penguins are sometimes gay. Prison ones, she talked about, psych ward ones, the ones where the reason why is obvious but they would have had to be clever to pull it off, or incredibly physically strong. The ones where it takes hours upon hours with something dull, the ones that took more physical strength to execute than they themselves thought possible, were the ones that really got her. They may have surprised themselves right before the end, been pleased with themselves for their stick-to-it-iveness, she commented. She read about it from a medical perspective: how long, once you try it, they keep you on watch. And why take you off then? She asked. Shouldn't we all be on watch? Numbered off in twos, watching each other? And why do women fail more than men at it? Is it because we don't really want to, we have a stronger will to live? Maybe it's 50/50 for all of us, if we will kill ourselves, because there's always a chance you'll wake up one morning someone else. She said we should all be on suicide watch.

She'd sit and tell me about a mysterious suicide while I drank coffee standing in our kitchen. I never waited long enough; I always burnt my tongue.

We were in an upper middle-class, white college, which meant we didn't do much of anything. We sat around with each other until just before noon on the weekends.

There were a few mornings when she burned eggs on scratched up Teflon so badly we had to go sit on the porch and open all the windows while the smoke cleared out. You can smell the cancer, I would say. And even though it was cold we would wait it out. She'd eat cereal instead, mad and cold. I'd smoke a cigarette. I can smell your cancer, she would say.

This morning I took my coffee and slouched at the table. I washed down an appetite suppressant with water—a tiny white pill that I would sometimes forget I took, and then would take another. It wasn't suicide, this habit; rather it was something I would later regret.

How would you do it, she said.

If I were going to commit suicide, I wouldn't be me, so there's no way to answer.

She didn't mind her appetite. She sat and ate pancetta, avocado, a fried egg, brown rice toast, orange juice. She ate it quickly and deliberately, like she did everything. Just like she spoke.

There was a dog that committed suicide in 1845. It was in the London News, she told me. It tried twice, to drown itself, but was rescued each time. They said it threw itself, both times, in water, purposefully making its legs and arms perfectly still, trying to drown. On the third time, it kept its head dunked under, and it succeeded. It was dead by the time rescuers pulled it out. It was a black lab.

“Why does it matter what kind of dog it was,” I said.

They’re loyal, you know. The reports said it had been acting strange for two weeks prior. Just like humans. Humans do things out of character right before, like give away their things, stop talking as much.

Finally, I gave in, I shared a story, not my own, but one that I knew. There was a boy in our town, I said, the town I grew up in. Well he was a boy when I knew him; he was a man when it happened. His family was rich; they had a beautiful house in the country, all that kind of stuff. He was always getting in trouble with his parents for drinking and weed, because his family went to church, that sort of thing. His dad was a doctor. He had already left home though, I said, that was the thing. He was already free from them, but he was home over a Christmas break sometime, I had seen him around town. We had said something and laughed, I don’t remember what, I don’t remember where, it may have been at the movie theatre—a Christmas Eve showing, when you go to the movies with your family because you have nothing else to do with them. Anyways, we both played tennis when we were younger, that’s how we knew each other, in high school we got our weed from him, so I knew him again sort of, but not well. Anyways, it was between Christmas and New Years, he shot himself in his parent’s field outside our town.

I stopped, I was done. I hugged my coffee with my hands. I was at a rich white school studying writing and how to cover up hunger with coffee and such—with long walks and weed. I could’ve made it a better story but I didn’t care to.

She wanted to know if he showed signs of it. She wanted to know what made it odd. What else, she said, what else. What had he left behind? What had he done that day?



“It doesn’t matter now,” I said, “because he’s dead. And it was really the first time I had thought of him that way.

Our apartment was quiet. It was winter. I felt heavy through my chest; there was no heavy lifting to be done.

*It was the year that Bill Clinton became president, Billy Crystal hosted the Academy Awards, the World Health Organization declared Tuberculosis a Global Emergency, Clinton coined “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” in the US Military, which made different kinds of people different kinds of mad. The girl’s mother was a fan of Bill Clinton. Her father, who didn’t care much for politics, could say, “I did not have sex with that woman” with his finger crooked and pointing and in the best slightly-southern-slightly-scratchy-Clinton voice they had ever heard. For this, and for other things like this, he was the girl’s hero. When her friends came over she asked her father to do Donald Duck, Porky Pig, Elmer Fudd. She asked him to say the Greek alphabet really fast. The girl said to her friends, to her mother, to everyone, “Watch my dad, watch my dad.”*

“I used to believe in him,” her mother said, not to the girl but to the kitchen with the girl standing in it. She was young enough still to make stuffed animals talk. She still sat in her room on her bed for hours surrounded by them, lost in their world wordlessly, or with whispers. She still got a step stool from the pantry to get down a glass for milk. She still poured with both hands. “It wasn’t always like this,” her mother said.

The girl knew when it was best to stay still and listen.

Her mother was baby-faced, but getting older around the eyes. Her hair was long and blonde and beautiful but a little bit dirty and pulled back in a low ponytail at the bottom of her neck. Her knees were pulled up to her chest because she was barefoot and

the kitchen floor was cold. She was blowing cigarette smoke through a crack in their sliding glass door—out to their backyard, which was black. This was something she did only when the father was out. This was something her doctor had all but begged her not to do—a family doctor, who knew them well—not because of the smell, like the father always hated, but because of her already fragile chest.

The girl's father was a farmer and a loner and mad and out driving gravel roads. He lost his temper only once as far as the girl ever knew, and it was aimed at the dashboard of their blue Pontiac Firebird and not at either of the girl or her mother. He split it—but not his wife or his daughter—in two, and the three of them were silent after, on their way out to eat. This was the first time the girl wished she had a sister or brother. Mostly he just left, through the back door quietly, without hitting anything or saying anything and without saying anything to the girl or touching the top of her head like he does otherwise when he is going somewhere. The girl always fell asleep before he got home but he was always there in the morning—awake first and walking through the house, making the noises only a father can make.

She was young enough still to think that he'd always come back—that he'd always be a lot taller than her and would always pick her up and hug her into his chest, and that he'd always be awake first in the mornings, walking with his big footsteps up the stairs.

Her mother stared out through the window for long enough, was silent long enough, that the girl thought it was safe to move, to get a glass and pour milk, to walk quietly with it and not spill it, back upstairs to where she had cookies hidden from the day before, wrapped in a napkin in her drawer. Her mother put out her cigarette slowly like

she was sad about it. The girl moved and the floor creaked and her mother looked at her like she forgot she was there.

“You will have it all someday,” she said. She said, “You will be prettier than me and richer than me and you are smarter than me already. One day,” she said, “there will be boys lined up around the block for you.” And the young girl pictured them there are on the rough and uneven sidewalk where she rollerbladed—not allowed in the street. She pictured them standing there bored.

Only a few weeks before this night on a strangely warm Christmas Eve the mother and the father together had lifted her up on the counter to tell her that they were Santa, and there was no use believing it in any other way.

And so when the mother said in the kitchen that night, “I used to believe in him,” the girl must have been thinking of Santa Claus, thinking that the mother, too, was sad at the loss of what she once thought he was. The girl nodded and walked quietly away from her—avoiding the creaks she knew of the old house, skipping the loud stairs—back up to her bedroom, back on her bed.

\*

Dear Readers,

My mom is the only one who calls me Leoti. My friends call me Leo, but when some people ask I just say Lee because Lee is easy and because some people don't like for you to have to explain stuff to them. Some people like to get it right away. I'm old enough to know some things about people. If it's a teacher, for example, you want to say

it and then spell it. Bam Bam. Right away. Without them having to ask, “and do you know how to spell that” like you are a baby. But for you, readers, it's Lee-OH-tuh, like the town in Western Kansas, which is windy, and dying. Where no one's having babies and everyone is old. This is where the mother met the father. It's where I go every year for Thanksgiving and Christmas and when we get there, there's a sign that says, “Welcome to Leoti” and every time we pass it I say, “welcome to me” but I'm in the backseat and my parents never answer. By that time my dad is tired from driving, and my mom always gets quiet when she's on her way home. My mom named me and calls me Leoti because she says it's unique and special in a way only some people will see.

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We live in the smallest house on a block of big, beautiful houses. My mother says “Victorian homes.” Victorian means old. It means the shutters and the roof look different than the other shutters and roofs around town but I never would've noticed these things if my mom hadn't shown me and I don't think it's just because I'm shorter. My mom notices things like people's gardens and their sidings and the era of their homes. There is modern, there is ugly, and then there is Victorian. Victorian means very old and easy to break, like the mirrors on our wall going up our staircase, or my grandma. Other people on our block are dentists or bank presidents or wives, or they do nothing at all except for own big homes. My mother asks me to water our flowers and say the alphabet at every square section of our garden on fall mornings before school. Sometimes I do it right, but like Mrs. Newby says my mind wanders a lot. I think about school, and then I

think about lunch, and then I think UVWXYZ.

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The afternoon after the morning of the first time my dad and I drove my mom to the hospital, but she got sent back home, told to rest and to wait, a very fat lady tripped and fell in our yard. She fell in the part of yard between sidewalk and curb, a part you'd hardly claim as your own, my dad's friend Cliff said later that evening, staring at my mother who was pale and quiet, except you still have to mow it. My dad walked outside when it happened and the fat lady told him she was suing. She rolled around a little trying to get up and my dad and Cliff had to lift her. I saw from the window how mad she looked, how red in the face, and how my dad bent both his knees and kept his back real straight like he's shown me to lift. The lawsuit, my dad explained to me later, is for negligence, which means we have what could be called a pothole in what could be called our yard. My dad said here in America all people do is look for money in ways they don't deserve. He said it's just lucky for us we don't have much to give her. But the way I see it is, we didn't invite the lady over to trip in our yard, she just came on her own. The way I see it is, unless you go asking people for trouble, they shouldn't get to give you any. This was before my mother started coughing up what looked to us like either brown blood or red dirt or at least before she told us. This was right before my dad started leaving the house for hours at a time. Things were better before the fat lady fell.

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I am the devil and Jesse is an angel because Jesse wanted wings and I have red hair. I have hair like an old copper penny but my mom sprays over it with red like blood from a can. I can tell from the smell it is sticky. It smells like the smell you're not supposed to breathe so I breathe deeply in like I have practiced and hold my breath until she's done. I can tell it will rain by the way my dad comes outside and looks up at the sky, says "Looks like rain." I can tell Jesse will make us stay out even later than when the streetlights come on. I can tell that when it rains the paint in my hair will run down my neck and down my back and make this red velvet shirt I'm wearing stick to my body.

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Our mothers ask us every year what we would like to be but they always talk us into being something that matches. They are sisters and sit in folding chairs and each have a camera in each of their laps. They both have long blonde hair like Jesse's and are both wearing dresses like Jesse is too. I guess mothers and angels are the ones who wear dresses. Jesse's mom and my mom laugh the same laugh so that you can't tell when they're laughing what noise belongs to who. They tell me to glare and tell Jesse to smile and they each take a picture and laugh their same laugh. When we get home tonight we will stay up late and Jesse will make me trade, play rock-paper-scissors, and I will end up with all of hers that is sour and she'll get all of mine that is chocolate because that's the way it always goes. Still I take Jesse's hand and we run out of our circle.

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Yes, I am an only child and yes, I have thought about what a sibling would be like and yes, I know if I'd want a brother or a sister. I would definitely want a sister. It's like when people ask you which parent you like best and you pretend like there's no way you could say, that you like them both the same, because you think nothing could be worse than choosing one over the other, but secretly you know. Just like adults who are getting ready to have a baby and you ask if they want a boy or a girl and they say, "Oh we don't care at all." It's just not true. Everyone always has something in mind. Anyways, why I'd rather have a sister, it's easy, I have friends with older brothers, and little brothers, and the thing about brothers is they have a different set of rules. Not only are you going to spend your whole time being compared to your sibling, fighting with your sibling, but if



it's a brother and not a sister you're "playing with a different set of cards," as my grandma would say. I know older brothers. I know older brothers that lock sisters in closets. I know older brothers who show their little sisters and me movies and magazines that we're not supposed to see. I know brothers who can stay out later than their sisters and go further from home. I know the games that brothers play with their friends who are brothers too and I know that the sisters aren't included. If I had a sibling I would have a sister and her and I would go as far for as late as any other sister's brother.

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My grandma says I have my dad's personality but that it looks cuter on man. She says I can't say things like I say and ever expect to catch a husband. I'm sitting at her kitchen counter in a town in Western Kansas where when you get bored throwing leaves up into the Western Kansas wind you have nothing else to do. My grandma has two matching chairs in the living room and two on the porch even though my grandpa's not around now and she only uses one, and you can look each way from her porch and not see anything. I don't think this sounds so bad, not catching a husband, but my grandma says she doesn't mean catch like catch a cold. She says I'll care about it one day.

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It's almost Thanksgiving and then we get to leave and my dad and I eat vanilla bean ice cream while everyone's asleep. I whisper to him that I don't want to get married and I don't want to get old and he tells me I don't have to. "But," my dad says, "Getting old is better than not getting old, and you'll change my mind about the other." When

you're nine people tell you you'll change your mind all the time.

\*

I have Jesse, at least. In our town there is a swimming pool and a park and a donut shop and a big dump and sometimes Jesse and I would rather go to the dump to see what we find than do anything else. But Jesse mostly likes to swim, and I mostly like to dance. Jesse, more than anything, likes to see how long she can hold her breath under water and how much longer she can than me. She is a swimmer and I am a dancer and she says the difference between her and me is that when she gets older and bigger she can be in races and can win. One time last summer we were having a breath-holding contest and I came up and she was gone. I opened my eyes under water and I didn't see her bright blue bathing suit, and I knew this wasn't good right away because Jesse always stays under longer. I waited at the pool for her to come back all afternoon but she had already gone home. Sometimes, when you least expect it, this is how Jesse is.

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Mrs. Newby says what everyone says about me being like my dad except when she says it she's not smiling and it's in the office with my mom. Mrs. Newby teaches math, and I'm ok at Math, and I'm quiet in class so I'm sitting here with them and I don't know why they're mad. Mrs. Newby says, "doesn't pay attention," and "doesn't seem to care." She says "just like her father" and scrunches her face to say "demeanor" likes it's a painful thing to say. My mom says she's sorry but I don't see why she should be and I

open my mouth and start to ask this but they both say to shut up. The sunshine's shining through the window after three and all I want is to leave so I say I'll work real hard at not being like my dad and my teacher makes a sound and says, "do you see what I mean?"

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Ballerinas know to come out of a pose the exact opposite way that they went in. To keep their eyes on one spot when they spin so that they never get dizzy. Their arms are solid and strong like tree branches, but look soft and flowing like skinny branches in the wind. Their fingers look like they might fall off like leaves in the fall. I try to show Jesse a ballerina's arms and Jesse holds her arms out like airplane wings. Ballerinas make dancing look easy but it's not. They know how to look soft and be strong at the exact

same time.

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One thing that's the same about Jesse and me besides our grandma and grandpa and that each of our dads is each of our uncles is that our mothers didn't want us. Her mother tells her that she was a surprise and my mother tells me that I was a gift because my mom goes to church now and everything's a gift but we've overheard them saying that we were both "unplanned." They talk a lot more now since my mom's been sick. This means Jesse and I spy more now that my mom's been sick. Jesse has two older brothers who are much older and have left and her mother tells her that she was a "good little oops" and Jesse believes her. I'm an only child and I'm not as smart as her about some things but even I know the difference between surprise and mistake. I know that sometimes children are just something that happens. I told Jesse once that our mothers didn't want us and she climbed out of the bathtub and locked me in by myself. She propped the sliding glass door shut with a mop from the closet and just stood there smiling at me all wet and naked. I sat back down in the water, which got cold after a while. There are some things Jesse and I will never do and one of them is scream for our mothers. Just like there are some things we don't lie about, like things that they say. So I just sat there in the water and rubbed goose bumps from my arms, and eventually, like I knew she would, Jesse let me out. She told me to stop being a baby.

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Today is the second time in my whole life I've been in the newspaper, "blah blah blah, and six grandchildren, blah blah, Leoti Scott." The first time was the same sort of thing. Of course I don't like why I'm in the newspaper, but I like being in the newspaper, it's sort of like being famous, when people you don't know read your name, and I like the words "survived by." It makes it sound like something I did, like there was an accident or a tragedy that happened to us all and I am one who survived it. It sounds like I am clever, or fast. I survived because I am young, and young people often survive. My grandpa didn't survive because he is old and old people die easily, from anything, like a cold. This wasn't a cold though. If the same thing would have happened to me as what happened to my grandpa I would have died too.

It was what the newspaper called the next day a "Tragic, Freak Accident at the Age of 83." I know that it's always the grandma's that are calm at the funerals because I've had two grandpas die and my grandmas' eyes were dry, while other people cried. Then afterwards everyone says how he should've lived to be 100 and how nice the service was and how he would have liked it. But I don't think anyone would like their own funeral and how everyone is dressed in black and the boring music that plays. When people say things about what other people would like, like people who are dead now, I don't really think they know.

\*

I've told you before that my dad is a farmer but he is mostly a cattle rancher, which is a nice way of saying that he takes care of animals just to send them off to die. He helps calves be born he knows he's going to kill when they're big. He watches them

get bigger and they know his voice and they trust him and they don't even run when he comes to the field. It was a chilly fall morning, with tall grass that was hard to run through and I wore overalls and he let me carry a hammer in the loop on the side of them. We rode a tractor through his wheat and hay and we carried hay bails to the cattle on the back of his truck and we stepped out into the field with them because my dad was showing me not to be afraid. But I watched them all scatter when they saw me, even though I'm so much smaller than them.

\*

My dad and I eat at Bucky's on Sundays while my mom's still at church, and my Aunt Beth, and Jesse, because he says God doesn't care what we wear or where we are on Sunday at noon. Here, there are two hamburgers for two dollars.

"The usual?" our waitress says.

It feels like something I had known even though I didn't. I ask him if she's going to die. I ask him if this is why she goes to church now. He looks down at his basket with that oily piece of paper under his French fries and then up at me and then back down at his food.

"Not anytime soon," he says.

I'm old enough to know we don't live forever.

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It's Halloween again and we are ten and our mothers have dressed us like the Wicked Witch from the West and the Good Witch from the North and guess who's from the West. My mom puts green make-up all over my body, which doesn't work very well, and I just look kind of sick. My mom is skinnier now, my parents talk less, and she sneaks cigarettes while nobody's looking. Jesse is sitting on the porch steps playing with her sequins, playing with her wand, turning leaves into frogs. It's warmer this year and the green, already, comes off on my fingers with sweat.

I run into my room and rip off my witch dress and take off my hat and rub off my mole. I go into my closet kick off the black boots my mom picked out and put on my tennis shoes and mess up my hair. I don't know what it is I'm trying to be. All I know is I don't want to be the opposite of Jesse. It feels like a long time I'm in my room, looking

in the mirror, trying to think, think, think, of what I am, what I can be. Then I start to wonder why nobody's looking.

\*



Here are the things I'm most afraid of, in no particular order, because my youth director asked me to make a list of the things I'm afraid of and my mom's making me walk to the church once a week to see him.

My youth director says it's very strange for a girl my age to have such apocalyptic thoughts, but I think it's strange for someone his age to spend so much time with kids and eat so much pizza. I think it's strange to study God in college, which is what he says he did. I don't say any of this though, I'm not dumb or a person with no manners, and instead



I say, “What is a girl my age supposed to think about?” And it’s funny because he answers me even though he's never been one.

I'm afraid that my parents will be gone one day and be gone forever. I get afraid of this when they leave the house and don't tell me because I'm napping, but I'm only napping until the front door shuts, then I run down to find a note I know they've left in the place I know they've left it, in the kitchen by the phone. Sometimes when I hear the door slam I think to myself, this is it, they are gone. They want to be kids again with no kid of their own. They don't want their yard anymore, our Victorian home, or our cat. Then I think, how could they leave our cat? Then I find their note and I know it's okay. I am not scared of spiders like everyone else. If I am scared of any other living thing it is people, or pit bulls. I've seen on TV what pit bulls can do. Pit bulls can get shot through their forehead and keep snapping at your feet. I am afraid when I see low flying airplanes because I've seen war movies and I know that when countries bomb other countries it's at a time you'd least expect, like when you're watering flowers. I am afraid sometimes that by some weird genetic accident I will not die and live forever and be lonely and old.

## The Flood

I told my friend about it later, in an all-night diner back in Kansas, when I was ready to miss it. Sometimes, right after, you're just glad to be home.

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I rose at sunrise, I told him, a few days after my college graduation to drive all day, in and out of every different kind of rain—there were dead black trees coming out of a clear blue lake, which haunted; and then, somewhere in northern Louisiana, there were houses around me half-way under water and I found myself waiting for the highway to be covered, flooded, in which case, I thought, I will just turn around. I thought water was something I could turn around and drive away from. I didn't know what flooding meant yet. Highways that were supposed to be very raised above other highways had water coming up on both sides of them, water that moved, that rushed, and this made my heart beat hard in my throat as water drops appeared lightly on my window, not enough for wipers yet. The radio told me nothing of the weather. The radio told me “the amount you give is between yourself and the Lord.” The station had changed with my changing states and I hadn't noticed because my knuckles were white on the wheel. I turned the radio off.

I had a friend in New Orleans and college was done with me and I had no plan for a future like none of us did. I stopped at a seafood restaurant coming out of a lake, not knowing if it was supposed to be—it had lakeside in its name—to ask someone, anyone, if I was making a mistake. “Is the water going to keep coming up the further South I go?”

I asked her this thing as if she were the weatherman, or God. She was a catfish cashier. She had a rural Louisiana accent, though, which to me was just as good as God, and with her black eyes, sullen, she seemed like she may know.

“You be alright,” she said, blinking her eyes through the window at my car, and then back at me, and then at her palm to count my change. I took my paper basket of catfish and fries and sat out on the back deck to eat it quickly. I watched raindrops on a big body of water from under the safety of an awning. I thought about how many drops of water it takes to make a lake like this rise an inch higher. Ripples came out from every drop. I thought about the tires on my car. There was a man there, too. He was white and old and I could feel something dead inside him from where I sat. He and I were alone on the deck, not saying a word, and I felt his eyes on me. Southern mosquitoes are the size of daddy long legs back in Kansas—too big to want to smash on your arm. I got up and walked quickly back to my car.

My mom had asked me, “Why, why would you go there?”

“That whole place is flooding,” she said, “and even when it's not flooding, it's still a big mess.”

But my parents were getting old; there was only so much they could do.

It was summer and I was young and had only seen really bad weather from the other side of a TV screen.

Louisiana, like Texas, lasts forever when you're driving North to South. It stopped raining and the sun came out, somewhere. There were rows of trees on either side of me, which either holds you tight or traps you compared to the open plains of home. And then the hours when you think you are getting close to the city will have you driving through twisted highways, leaning towards big green signs with big white arrows—leading you, promising, New Orleans this way, again and again and again. You are not really there until you see colored beads hanging from trees like leaves—even still, in the months after Mardi Gras, and policemen on street corners smoking cigarettes with their bellies hanging over. I went to a coffee shop I knew.

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The house was small and white with uneven floors in the middle of a neighborhood of uneven floors, and stray cats, and sunflowers that were huge—as big as my head—growing up between houses. The girls who lived there were older than me—one of them I knew from high school, she was a grade school teacher now and stayed at her boyfriends mostly, on the other side of the city. The other worked at a Golf Course. Her name was Katherine and she smelled like Vodka no matter what time of day. There were three locks each on the front and back door but they kept the doors wide open when they were home, letting the breeze blow through. There were scarves strung over lamps, low couches and a weed pipe on a glass coffee table. There was music playing far off somewhere else, and people yelling and clapping—things you could only hear when the wind shifted in the right direction, coming over the river. I brought my things in and

stared at it all for a while. I was twenty-two and three or four states away—depending on which way you counted. It was my twenty-second birthday. A few people had called. There was no one I'd miss.

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It was May and the neighbors said it hadn't rained in the city since Mardi Gras and no one seemed to think it would even though the clouds would roll in some nights dark and fast and you could smell the air getting thicker. One more downpour and the city would be flooded. "It could cause still water," is what the newscasters said. Still water, I guess, is the type that you stand in your living room in. There was some river somewhere that was just an inch from the top, and would surely spill over—would come rushing down to the city, which was lower than the rest of the state.

"It won't rain," people said, on the street or in bars, people who had lived there all their lives.

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I went there for what I thought would be the summer or forever. I secretly hoped someone would ask me to stay. I met a construction worker from Iowa first, who told me the foundations on the houses here were the worst he'd ever seen, and that I needed to make a friend with an attic. He said it could rain, easily—he, like me, couldn't believe

that no one was worried. I met him at an outdoor concert soon after I got there; everyone had laid down blankets to watch fireworks and sip on beers from their coolers. People set off fireworks all the time for no reason. People danced and clapped and sung for no reason at all. They're happy enough to not be under water. He pointed in the direction where he was working on rebuilding some houses, said to "stop by and see sometime."

Later I brought him a sandwich. His name was Patrick.

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I sat down with Patrick in a bar called Pal's Lounge one night—a bar and a night, which both seemed to be entirely dark blue and quiet, and he said that he would be my friend with an attic. He said he's working on a house that's going to be great once they get rid of the bugs. He asked what I like to do for fun—a question that never has an answer that's neither sexy nor boring. He had a bright red nose and bleach blonde hair from working outside all the time, especially here, and I told him my father once had skin cancer along the outline of his sunglasses. This seemed like the wrong thing to say after, tactless. I may have sat there with him longer if the smoke in the bar didn't make my eyes burn so bad.

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I applied to a hundred places, it felt like—Uptown, Downtown, Frenchmen St., Magazine St., Ice Cream shops, bars, restaurants, book stores—I read a ghost book,

looked for ghosts, smiled at a hundred different business owners, heard their story of a ghost, told them I could do anything, make coffee, clean. They all called me sweetie and honey and baby and told me “business is bad.” They all said summer is the off-season and to come back in September. They said tourists don’t like to be here with this heat. They often asked me how old I was as if I might not be old enough to work in a bar. My Kansas-ness and long hair and the way I didn’t smoke, I guessed, made me look younger than I was, made me smile and say “Thank you” even when I didn’t get the job. Everyone knew I wasn’t from there, no matter what I said or didn’t say. I’d come in and ask if they were hiring and they’d say, “Where ya from, Baby?”

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But I had to find a job and make money, or I’d have to go back. I spent afternoons reading books on my roommate’s bed, the one who was never home. It became my routine to apply for jobs in the morning—it would be 100 degrees by 10:00AM, steamy—and then walk back to the house and read all afternoon. Some nights I’d go out with my other roommate, Katherine. Some nights we’d stay in and cook fettuccine and oysters and drink wine on the porch. I’d listen to her problems with men; she’d listen to my injustices job hunting. When we went out we’d call a taxi and tell the driver “Frenchmen St., that cute little corner bar with the Jazz upstairs.” Katherine had friends that would stay with us, stopping because they liked the city, passing through to somewhere else, like me. Except unlike me they seemed to have a good idea of how long they’d be staying here, where they were going next. Unlike me they were from places like New York, Atlanta, they knew exactly what they wanted to drink at the bar.

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No one knew each other's middle names, which to me made us all strangers. None of us had children but many of our friends did which makes us all the same age. Me, I was starting to worry I'd dream of them soon, the way I'd always heard I would. There were five of us there in the red glow of that bar with the tired look of highway driving in our eyes. We were sitting in a circle, a star, taking turns buying rounds. This means commitment to five drinks at least because if someone only knows one thing about you, you don't want it to be that you left before your turn. That night, I was a sipper. I was the one who got a full beer sat down behind the beer I was sipping. They were all chain-smoking cigarettes but there was only one in the group whose death you could smell, whose fingers, I knew felt like sandpaper, even before he touched me. I hoped he never would, but being a girl, you could only hope for such things. And when he touched me later, I let him, for a while—playing pool, with his hand over my hand, him letting me win, and then back at Katherine's place on the bed I'd been sleeping on, before I told him to stop. So there was him, the nicotine-fingers from New York, who had driven twenty hours straight, he talked the most, not stopping, still thought he was driving, afraid to fall asleep. He brought along a girl from Colorado. There is another man who lives here in New Orleans, who has a scarred, acned face and fights fires and has been seeing Katherine. We were all staying at her house, them on couches and matts in front of the window box air-conditioning, and so then there is her, Katherine, chain smoking, drinking a vodka cranberry that looks like clear vodka to me. There was the girl from



Colorado, who's never known humidity, you can tell by the way she doesn't sweat and looks sick. She and I give each other smiles. Then there was me, the one with the purse very close to my side because I was the one there from Kansas. The one who drinks beer and got quiet while everyone else holds something else and got loud. We wanted commonness but nothing heavy because we were tired and we wouldn't know each other long. You can talk about the very personal or the very impersonal, with strangers, so we talked about drugs, which has the tendency toward both. None of us had any, which was a thing we had in common. In that bar on Frenchmen St. that you could never find without describing it to a driver, we were the perfect star of five strangers who wouldn't think about each other soon but would know each other better maybe, one day later on.

There are things that get exhausted with people you've just met: what mothers and fathers do, what we studied in school, but Katherine and her friends and I talked all night and didn't mention one of these things. This is what I liked about New Orleans, why I thought for a moment I could stay. That and the live music everywhere that no one makes you pay for—you just drop your money in a tip bucket near the band.

An old man with the longest white beard and hardest face and big belly sat alone in the crowd, said, when the band asked if everyone's from around these parts, "I'm from the nine and I don' min' dyin'."

That's what I learned of people from the ninth ward.

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There was another boy, at a coffee shop one morning, who told me I look like Jenny Lee Lewis and I didn't know who that was but it sounded like a compliment and he had a dog so I said "sure," he could take me to dinner. I could tell he wasn't from there, plus he said so—"I was born in Oklahoma." His being from Oklahoma seemed somehow to say I could trust him—it's a state like mine—boring and flat. He looked like me except for taller and a boy. But he had just enough of an accent to tell me that he knows his way around, at least he'd know his way to dinner. When he picked me up that evening—I didn't let him come to the house but I walked down a couple blocks, to a black iron fence surrounding the fairgrounds in Mid City—a fence he too lived close to, supposedly. I didn't recognize him right away. The car pulled up beside me and I panicked a little. He looked different without the dog or the coffee. Earlier, when I had said, "How do I know you won't kill me," he had said, "My friends are coming too, who are married." So his friend who was married was behind the wheel and his pregnant wife was in the backseat where I crawled in, and we sped off, like all drivers in New Orleans do, down those narrow little streets so that it feels to me like we're going to smash into every parked car. I took to closing my eyes.

We went to a French Restaurant called Delachaise where he worked, it was a wine bar, the doors and menu said, which to me meant one of those places where you are supposed to know how things work before you even go in there because so often people

will get confused and make the servers mad. I too, made someone mad, asked the wrong person for water. I was just starting to eat meat again then and that night I ate frog and salmon and duck and a Kobe Beef slider and began to feel sick, the taste of animal iron in my mouth. I didn't order anything for myself; he ordered it all. The two boys talked to each other the whole time and not once to the pregnant lady or me. I thought about starting a conversation with the wife but I didn't know what to say. My date got up with the other man to pay, and the pregnant lady and I sat there staring at each other. She was Hawaiian. She was sipping wine with a full pregnant belly which I know is ok in some places but was making me squirm. I asked her if they were going to take me home soon. She didn't seem like a woman with a lot of choices, she had sad eyes, but she seemed like she could tell me what their next move would be. She gave me a smile of comfort. The married couple dropped us both off by the fairgrounds, close to his house; he didn't mind me seeing where he lived. He brought out the dog I had met that morning, Waldo. I can remember the dog's name but not his, said he was going to take him for a walk, I said, "thank you for dinner" and walked too quickly away.

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In New Orleans, dogs lie on the floors of the bars people smoke in, and I may have sat there with the construction worker longer, but instead I packed my things up again in the first few days of July and not because of the rainclouds that promised a broken dam somewhere, that promised rushing water, or because I couldn't find a summer job and was running out of money, or because of this boy, who I knew I didn't

want, or because of the two others, but maybe all because of two cockroaches by the leg of the piano when I picked up a shirt one night from the floor: a mother and a baby. A big one, I knew, could've come in from outside, with the cats, perhaps, who looked starving and mean, but I knew what it meant once I'd seen a baby. I knew that was it. I left a note in the next moment, wine glass in hand, on the kitchen counter—my roommates out—and got on the highway towards Dallas as the sun was coming up. I don't remember what I wrote but it was something like “something came up back in Kansas.”

In New Orleans it seemed like every person's voice rasped, even the young people, and the houses were made in a hurry, not to last. My Iranian neighbors smoked in the morning on our shared porch before they'd even had coffee. Only the men came out and spoke English. The women stayed inside the door, looking out. It was my first summer out of college. I drove back home because everything seemed cancerous to me then, dangerous: all the pit bulls, the harsh sun.

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At any other time of year driving back home from the South the temperature steadily drops through Texas and Oklahoma but in the middle of the day in the middle of July in the middle of the country it is every bit as hot as it has been in New Orleans. The air gets drier as you drive north but not any cooler and the firework stands become fewer and further between because no one wants to see all of Oklahoma burn. Or because the South is poorer and so things like fireworks are more of a passed time. You begin to see

signs that tell you, *Abortion is Murder*, and the radio turns to Christian Talk only. I had an old car that overheated in the afternoons on the highway and so I had to turn on the heat and roll down the windows; this, men have told me, pulls hot air off the engine. My sunglasses, from sweat, slipped down my nose and I pushed them back up. The sun wouldn't go away for a second in the cloudless Northern Texas sky.

I took deep breaths on the side of the highway by myself, driving back home. I bought a hotdog at a gas station, and then bought another one. It had been years since I had eaten a hotdog. Then in Oklahoma, in construction, I was crawling, as I always am in Oklahoma. I wasn't in a hurry though. I thought of the bath I would take at my mother's, and the air conditioning and area rugs that are my mother's. I thought of how easy it would be to walk around her house barefoot and cover up with blankets.

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This is what I say years later to a friend in an all-night diner in the middle of the night in the middle of Kansas, with a very fat Native American man at the table next to us, asleep, with a table in front of him full of untouched food:

“Remember that summer when the Mississippi River flooded so much and they had to open a dam that destroyed all those farms in Louisiana; crops would be gone, they were saying, and houses, and there were all of those people on TV standing there three feet deep in very dark water? Remember how there were bugs in that water that no one

knew where'd they come from, or snakes maybe, something that was there in that water that was actually from somewhere very far away, like not from around that part of the country, which was somehow worrisome or maybe just strange? And there were interviews from news reporters standing in their waterproof boots, knowing why they were there, knowing how to get home, journalists with umbrellas, asking about what next, and about how sick everyone's dogs were, and what they had salvaged. The ones who were interviewed, of course—heard from—were the fools who stayed—*fools*, this is something my dad would say, something the reporters are thinking, too. The journalists were feigning admiration for these people for their bravery and loyalty to their homes with their condescending questions: “what will you do next?” There was an old lady crying. And just as one journalist was asking himself how one could stay at a home that is certain to go under, let one's dog die, I was thinking: *how could you lose it like that on TV?* People freer than I, people who have lost everything already. Well it was that summer, the beginning of that summer, when the flooding was only mildly devastating, devastating to the crops and not homes yet, that I had graduated from college, had decided to drive down there. Decided to try for something new.”

I said to my friend, “Nothing worries them there.”

My friend and I see the waitress trying to decide whether or not to wake the man. She drops the ticket off at his table and walks away. He has pock-marked cheeks the size of dinner plates; he has long gray and black hair pulled back in a ponytail behind his neck; his arms are hanging down beside him; his chin is resting on his chest; he is softly

snoring. My friend is eating pancakes, I ask only for more coffee so I can hold it, feel it warm on my hands. It's some winter now, sometime. And there is nothing to be scared of in the wintertime in Kansas, except for maybe being cold all alone.

New Orleans is a U, streets are narrow and curving and will stop to dead ends suddenly, so unlike here, knowing whether you are driving North, South, East, West doesn't ever help. Street signs are missing from streets and one-way signs are facing the wrong way and people who are from there say it's always been like that, that you have to know where you're going, that it's not from just one storm. I asked strangers to point me in the direction of a coffee shop I knew of in Mid City when I got there, the neighborhood where my friends lived. I oriented myself there, told my family I made it—optimistic, hungry, dry, alive.

## The Girl

### The Beginning

It was your Christmas party.

Really? I thought it was before that. I feel like I've known you so long. Where've you been all my life? Etc. Etc. Etc.

We saw each other at a show last year. And in high school I saw how separate and beautiful you were, but it was your Christmas party, the first time we hung out. And then you gave me a ride home for Christmas after. And then you said: Christmas is boring. And I thought that was the best thing I'd ever heard. But it wasn't really your party to begin with, remember, it was Amanda's. I hadn't met her yet. But you had told me all about her: her food, her hair. How she said Car-a-mel; how she made homemade candy. She was going to cook this huge meal and jar desserts for the holidays, and needed a space to do it in because she was living back with her parents again—her asshole father, who scared even you. Her student loans had kicked in. You shook your head no when you talked about it, how much energy she had to create and how little her resources. The opposite of you, to your mind. But you had this new space; in the middle of November you had moved and changed everything all in like a week. You said that's how you were. A warning label you came with. You didn't have anything yet—no salt, pepper, lighter, wine glasses. Your stove light wasn't lit. Amanda was pissed. You were all calm though, you said to me:

If you're not doing anything, please come, bring records.

You had a new old record player—your father's from college—and this was its



rebirth. I could tell you didn't care about the food; you just wanted beer and music. I had been applying for jobs that day so I was all dressed up for people behind restaurant bars to tell me to come back later, and for your party. I had boots on that hurt my heels just a little but I wore them anyways because they were fancy and I thought your party would be fancy. I didn't know your friends, but I thought they were probably fancy. I brought over vinyl in a suitcase. That same suitcase that wouldn't open later, after we got back from Colorado—when we had to take it to the hardware store and then the bike shop where you used to work and finally bust it open with a hammer ourselves. But that didn't happen then, the suitcase just opened, the problem was your record player. It wasn't working quite right.

“It needs a new needle,” someone said, and so we switched to the radio.

I met Jen on your porch before I even went up; we talked for a long time, and went up together. Amanda was towering, slaving over the stove, throwing shit around—her hair flying, curly and wild and gold like it is. You were trying to introduce me to her and she was too busy with the something sloshing over a flame. She was obsessing, like she does. I had something to drink with mint in it, and whiskey, poured from the big jug on your fireplace. Someone had made it earlier and it had been brewing all day, you told me. I remember Miranda being weird, talking in a corner to a boy. So I talked to you and Collin and that's when you introduced me: the only other cool thing that came out of our town. And I made that joke like, “don't flatter yourself.”

I forgot about that.

We all took that shot together after we ate; something complicated and layered—something of Amanda's. I hated it. You hated it. That's when I switched to wine. I had

been vegan all summer and fall and that night I ate butter, chocolate, all sorts of shit. I was just happy to be there. I thought: screw being vegan. It felt great.

Cat and Dana came; I talked to Cat for a long time outside while we smoked. I told her I was gay right away—or she could probably tell—because we were talking about politics or something, family maybe, I don't know. The point was those two were engaged, and I wasn't used to having open couples around. It was nice. I was drunk by then; I came back upstairs and that's when Jen and Miranda were getting in that argument. They both like to argue—I know this now—but it wouldn't stop that night because it was late and everyone was drunk. What was it about? Do you remember?

It had something to do with whether or not America has any culture of its own?

Yes. I remember the fight, the words, but not really what the disagreement was. I still don't really get it.

Well, they were both trying to outdo each other by using bigger words. You were sitting next to me on the couch, quiet, sipping your beer like you always were. It was getting late. I could tell you didn't care about the argument. But the apartment looked good—open—with Christmas lights and food everywhere. And then I opened the bottle of wine that I brought and drank the whole thing, the second half straight from the bottle because everyone was gone. The argument about America and the strong weed made everyone want their own bed, they dispersed two by two. Then I was talking to just Miranda on your couch. We were talking about her sister—her sister's gayness, or not. When you're gay people think you're an expert in it, as if straight people know everything about being straight. You went to bed; you heated water on your stove to breathe in the steam. You were coughing a lot. You thought it was your space heater

drying out the air. That's when you first got my ACDC lighter, lighting your stove for the water. And you never gave it back.

I can't believe you remember that.

You were kind of irritated with us talking. You came out and said you couldn't sleep. So we were quiet then, finally. Miranda went to your bed. That's what straight girls do, they sleep together. I remember thinking I could sleep on your couch, and then trying, and then I couldn't. I remember shuffling around for my shoes, my jacket. I remember I saw two cop cars on my walk home. I was still twenty, you know. I was scared they would mess with me. I remember saying to myself: home, just make it home. I remember liking you already. I remember trying not to. I left my suitcase full of records at your place that night so that you could listen to them later and so I'd have to come back.

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I remember Amanda giving me trouble for not having salt and pepper yet, or the pilot light in the stove lit. She said, "How do you live without salt?" I said, "I eat out a lot." Her mouth dropped. Everything she says is sort of a yell. She was bringing all of her own kitchen stuff over and walking it up the long, steep staircase of my place and saying it was too warm in my apartment but really it was just because she kept climbing my stairs with all of her heavy things and I remember thinking it was the beginning of the end of some things for me.

Her and Sara came first and Sara set out snacks and made them look pretty. I remember thinking: I am not any good at being a girl. There was another girl I didn't

know who came next, and I opened a beer and stood in my kitchen, claiming it, even though it was the other girls cooking, while we waited for others. I had on a big orange-brown sweater. I was fatter than normal because I had been working at the cafe downstairs and eating pancakes and breakfast quesadillas a lot. Plus I was just starting to be happy again after my last job and my last love. You were sort of new to town but we were from the same place; our skin was exact same shade of very pale brown rice. We held our arms up together once and noticed. We are the same breed. Miranda had been with me all day. We had painted a big canvas full of blues to cover up my large white wall. I hate white walls. Her and I had tried to go on a run because it was nice that afternoon, strangely, and for the first time in my life I had allergies, or asthma, or something. I wasn't breathing well at all.

But then more people came and I got in touch with you to see if you were coming and you did, all dressed up, and it was the first time I noticed that your hair was a bit asymmetrical and I saw your one earring. You looked more feminine than I remembered and more foreign, too. You were someone I had known of, but really hadn't met yet. I introduced you, trying to be cute, as the only other cool thing that came out of our town and you said that thing about "don't flatter yourself" and everyone laughed and I felt sort of embarrassed. And I was glad you were there.

There was Jen and Brandon and Brandon's friends and Dana and her girlfriend, Cat, and Miranda had asked if she could bring some Medical school people with her and I had said no because I was still scared of my neighbor, Tom, and I had only been there a month or so and didn't want us to get too loud. Amanda made risotto and passed it out in small portions because more people came than she had invited. There was so much snack

food, though, and there was beer on ice in my refrigerator drawers, which I had pulled out and set on the dining room table. Sara and Derek came, and Collin and Joe. They all stood around pretty drunk, with their eyes squinted, swaying side to side. I might've been lonely if I hadn't met you.

Miranda whispered after you snuck out quietly that night that she should go look for you, and I said you would be fine. So that's what happened, before I fell asleep, finally, in the early hours of the morning: I met you as someone who could stay up all night drinking a bottle of wine and then another, and who I knew could find her way home. And you met me as someone who sipped beers all night and had trouble breathing.

My very old apartment got cold enough that winter, even though it was mild, that my honey would crystallize and stay stuck in the bear. You would hold it in between your hands to warm it for me and I would kiss your too-cold lips. In Kansas we are to pride ourselves on building good fires so that's what I did. I went out for sticks that looked like they'd burn and came back with an armful. You were impressed; your eyebrows were high. I had an old fireplace. You asked if I was going to rub them together for a spark and I said, "I own matches now. Thank you." I had never been with a girl before but I said to you a few nights later that I wasn't scared of anything and when I heard it out loud, I began to think: that's right, I am not scared of anything. I began to feel very free.

The End

I had walked home the night before from Mike's place—Mike had finally won over Autumn—knowing that you would be over the next day to leave. I knew it already,

when I asked you for a ride home his apartment and you just looked at me and said, “Goodnight,” before climbing down the stairs, of what is now nearly *their* place.

Sunburns can cause an illness in your body, and with all of the plants making it through the mild winter I had a respiratory infection and hot skin. I had to lie on a beach towel soaked in aloe to sleep. I thought about eating my eggs without sunflower seeds now and sleeping outside of your cave of a bedroom. I smoked that entire morning after, cigarette after cigarette, and waited for the sound of your boots, the drum roll to your arrival. You crossed your legs across from me and waited for me to speak first. Your mouth looked sad. I told you that you weren’t being sane and you said it was the first time that you felt otherwise. So you left. You left me in a sunburned heap on a chair that only leans halfway back.

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It was hot, the second floor of a tall building—above a kitchen above Kansas in July—and when the sun fell I had cold sweat on my forehead from being outside all day and from watching the skin open up on my forearm from that small tattoo.

The drop, drop, drop of black ink into a small clear container sits in my mind from it. My legs shook. I held down my knees with my free arm. I had walked there—slowing down my breath with my step—the way I always walked, breathing, in moments of finality. But the needle sting felt good, like something that would last.

And then that’s what it was—you were smoking a cigarette outside of Mike and Autumn’s and I took a drag. My hands shook. My face felt cold. I said “I can’t do this anymore.” My insides felt like they were shaking, too. You left and I left. There had been

too much adrenaline that day, too many free radicals floating through my body. I went to bed alone.

And I heard the chairs come down hard in the restaurant below me early in the morning. It wasn't my morning to open but I woke up just the same. Something was missing; it was empty in the dark space I sleep in.

When I approach a six top with pudgy old ladies who want different kinds of coffee and different kinds of crème, I bite the inside of my bottom lip just a little.

"Hi," they say—short with their words, and pursed with their lips. "What's in the"—they slow down to imitate only mocking the menu and not using their own words—"seasonal seafood cake?"

And I answer.

And their tip is small and wrinkled just like them.

I was glad not to be working, at least. And the trash men, who are so loud in the alley before the sun comes all the way up, yelled and sang and clanked metal together.

And I sat in my big window and looked down at the gravel and the men and none of them, ever, look up. The night before was the last of you and I together. I knew it was real this time because of the perfect straight lines the tears made down your cheeks, and how your eyes stayed calm.

## The Middle

You left work early to get a wedding present—a part of town you never go to. Department stores make your bowels move. Does anyone else know that? It was going to

be an outdoor wedding and it was too hot to wear pants and I don't wear dresses and you didn't like the boots I wore with my shorts. And so I took my tip money to the shoe store and found the cheapest shoes that would fit and that I could still wear with shorts. None of the browns in my wardrobe match and so I stuck to gray. It wasn't a funeral; I couldn't wear black. You like me in hats and so I put on a hat and then I had to go to Charcoal, torn between hues. Your lipstick let me know you were smiling through the windshield. We picked up Mike in his suit and tennis shoes. He liked to have traction. His ex-girlfriend would be there. He was already drinking, already sweating; he brought an open beer with him in the backseat and kept it low. For us, this was business. We were going to sell drunken guests Polaroid pictures of themselves for two dollars. We were going to make profit off flower girls and their sentimental mothers. We missed, by seconds, a priest ascending from the hells of a sun-dried porter potty. We gave each other the god-damn-it eyes. You watched more things through the lens from that point on. We sat near the middle because we were friends with them both. Mike sat in the middle of us because he didn't want to be alone. You took a picture of Mike and I with the sun behind us so that our faces showed up black. They passed out fans and water bottles and matches with the bride and groom's names on them. There was a smoking section where the least amount of dried-up hay lived. You ate too many mini tacos because they hadn't said there'd be dinner. You described to me what the cake tasted like because I asked you to because I am allergic to wheat. I drank two gin and tonics before they rang the dinner bell, which caused the mashed-potatoes to look tide-like on my plate. It was windy. Elbows held down the tablecloth. My hat asked to be excused but you asked it to stay. I only wanted to dance with you.



Around the time tiki torches were lit and a fire was started, we walked in a wavy line back to the car for more film. It had rained and then stopped? A man in the gravel parking lot told us that we made a dashing couple. You've been called dashing before, I'm sure, but we had never been called a couple. Not even to ourselves. I remember those words sounding so soft and sweet.

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The air seemed to be getting thicker but I didn't want to be the first to notice. My mom says you ask for it, spending eighteen months on one outdoor night. All of the tables with carefully chosen flowers, white chairs and white cloths, a full hog roasted, turned over, with its legs spread, all for us. There was Christmas lights and gravel. I brought you to the wedding; you were flattered I'd asked. We picked up Mike first who was drinking a green beer on his brown lawn. He hopped in the back.

All my friends were getting married—grooms singing that couldn't sing, fathers giving bad toasts. I looked up four registries that spring under florescent lights in department store lines, wrapped four practical presents: towels, candle holders, a soap dispenser, a toaster. I told my mom I'd never do it, and to get used to that idea.

The couple said their promises and we all stood around big tin buckets the size of baby pools full of ice and beer, amongst grass and gravel. Square haystacks were there to sit on but no one was sitting. There was a big beautiful red barn by our side. No one was drunk for a while and so we all stayed huddled with the people we brought. The bridesmaids stood in a semi circle smoking; their cleavage showed more as the sun went down. I flashed a perfect picture.

And when it started to rain, thick heavy rain, the bride's hair went up everywhere with waves. She kept under the awning of the barn and lit a cigarette she had to bum from an uncle. She had quit cigarettes and fast food for her yearlong engagement and I hadn't asked how that went because no matter what it was in the past now, this night was her wedding.

Someone built back up a bonfire with damp wood after the rain stopped; it was weak, but there. A few embers crackled. I held hands with you by the very small light of it. A Kansas wedding: they all just sort of fade out into a flat Kansas night.

I fell in love with you and only strangers seemed to notice—my friends didn't say a thing. You are tall, and poignant when you speak, and impossible to miss. You put your arm around my middle that night: impossible to miss. I brought you to a June wedding, and we ended up being the only ones dancing for quite a long time, in the barn during the rain. You didn't mind, though, you danced with me unembarrassed for hours. All the very old relatives lined up along the dance floor in wheel chairs; hands folded in their laps, their mouths hanging open just a little, watching.

I wanted a bath more than a wedding. We took our shoes off at the bottom of my stairs so that we wouldn't wake my neighbor, Tom. There was too much in his apartment for him to want to steal anything of ours, so we never worried. His things leaked from his doorway. This was the first apartment I had of my own: I had to boil water in a teakettle to wash dishes; I had to boil water on the stove to pour in my bathtub to soak my feet after serving; I could see the sunlight, peeking in, through a gap between walls and

ceiling; It was always too hot or too cold. And the water pressure was so weak that my hair smelled like that wedding for days: the bond fire, the cigarette smoke.

The champagne, a Polaroid picture of the bridesmaids smoking cigarettes in front of the sunset, which I found in your shirt pocket after, and you, none of it washed easily away.

I slept naked in front of the air-conditioning box that summer, slick with sweat and stuck to my couch. People not from Kansas can't believe how nights in July won't cool off. People from Kansas can't believe how nights in July won't cool off. I always wake up early though, with the trash men and the breakfast servers and the obsessive joggers, just so I can feel the much gentler hour at dawn.

ASSISTED LIVING

I walk up a hallway of women—women hunched over talking softly together, or staring at me as I pass, too slow to smile. To some of them it's a new place, a summer camp. Others have been here whole decades. Some are starting to forget what their husbands were like.

I read once that our living longer is due to us having lower-risk jobs. It's still not as likely that we are firefighters, police officers, soldiers. We fail more often at suicide, too. For those who believe in God, it is a gift from God just like everything is. It is He who grants a few years of peace at the end of our lives—glory days of the eighties not serving anymore. But we know now it's really iron. We know now it's in the blood, which is simple in its essence. It has to do with menstruation and diet and the heartbeat—both the duration and its texture. It has to do with how men yell through collared shirts and veins pop out of their necks and temples, like marines, or basketball coaches. It doesn't matter why it is, it is true in science and it is true in this place: old women sit and stand, and sit and stand, ageing and alone.

She has a round face, a baby face; her cheeks are smooth and perfect from a whole life of nighttime lotion. Her skin is tinted dark with Native blood, and her hair is dark and full. It is only by her walk that you can tell her age and she doesn't walk in front of anyone except for my mom and the nurses and sometimes me.

She turns her TV down when I walk in and says my name, says, "What are you doing here?"

“It was time to see my grandma,” I say.

She thinks my heart is broken. She thinks someone has died and she hasn’t heard about it. She gives me her wide eyes that say: well this is I, what now? I give her a kiss on the cheek and she gives me the lightest pat on my shoulder.

My grandma’s apartment, shocking after the heat outside, is frigid and beige. When I offer no more about being home, she turns the volume back on and we are quiet. She has spent this hot summer watching every second of a kidnapping trial because the child who was kidnapped is yellow-haired and blue-eyed, which adds more tragedy, somehow, even with the war on other channels or on no channel at all. My uncle Wade comes every Friday—her son born first when she wanted a girl—and when he comes they will have to watch football. For this reason, she basks in her solitude, she basks in the news. The same three photos flash across the screen: the young girl looking cute with her parents, the young girl looking cute in a swimsuit, the young girl’s head tilted at an awkward angle for her grade school pictures. Young, cute girls aren’t supposed to be stolen; they are supposed to live a long time married and then for a while alone.

People walk in and out of her two-room apartment yelling—yelling slowly and with a practiced patience. They overuse her first name. Their hands are on their hips like grade school teachers—“Good morning, Zena,” they say. She sits in her chair, holding a shaky hand still with her still one, and she is too polite or lazy to tell them that she can hear just like they can. She keeps watch on her TV through one eye because they’re always blocking it a bit. I curl up on her deep couch and hold a blanket up to my chin like a child. The other adults don’t talk to me and so I don’t talk to them either, like a child.

“Don’t be eager,” she says, when we are alone again. “Don’t be cold either,” she

says.

This is her advice about men. She thinks I'm home because of a guy because this was true once. One time I didn't show up for my job, drove three hours south through the flint hills of Kansas, and sat still with my mom and my grandma for three days while my mom made me coffee and asked if I was hungry, yet.

"Got it," I say.

I feel sleepy listening to the soft creak of walker wheels rolling on the carpet outside of her door, which is always open just a little. I feel sleepy here always, from highway driving and because people move slowly, talk slowly—going for their mail or to lunch or to nowhere.

A man with a red, thick neck coming out of a blue, plaid shirt comes in without knocking and yells to my grandma about her air-conditioning unit, which was leaking before but now it is not. He has it "all fixed up, Zena," he says, when he reemerges from the backroom.

"Do they ever knock?" I say.

"No," she says. "They probably think I won't hear it."

My grandma sits in an easy chair in front of her TV and my grandpa sits on the coffee table in a gold frame beside her. My mother framed her father in the weeks after he died, and dusts him off every Sunday when she comes with groceries. Today is a Sunday. When she comes in she first checks my face for signs of tragedy. When she doesn't see any she turns toward the kitchen. "Mother," she says, "I'm putting coffee filters in this top drawer in case you need them."

My grandma glances her way.

“You hear me?” My mom says.

“I hear you,” she says.

“Does your dad know you’re home?” says my mom. I am the only one in the room with a father alive; she doesn’t need to look toward me.

## OTHER SUNDAY MORNINGS

When he tucked me in for bed at night and I asked my dad if he would go to heaven since he always worked on Sundays because I knew you weren’t supposed to.

“Someone has to,” he would say.

When I was still reaching for the countertop on tiptoes, my mom and I sat at the kitchen table and mixed cinnamon and sugar together for cinnamon rolls that were actually Pillsbury biscuits with cinnamon and sugar. Mixing was my favorite because cinnamon and sugar are so different textured—cinnamon is soft and makes puffs of brown air around it; sugar is heavy.

My mom said my dad was a slave to his father. She told me this when I was young because I was an only child and grew up quick and in certain but different ways she and I were both lonely. Before they got married, she told me, my dad had promised her he wouldn’t work for his father forever.

We took them out of the oven and melted butter on top; we put them on double paper plates because the butter would soak through one paper plate completely. This didn’t require panty hose or hard-wooden benches.

My father fed cattle all morning; he farmed all afternoon and did whatever he did into the early evening. When he came home at night, I ran to him—I put my arms around

his leg and tried to jump up in his arms and he said not to because he was covered with oil and dirt and sweat.

“No hugs,” he would say.

And after his shower the moment had passed. I would be interested in something else. I would hug him once before bed because he told me to. I would ask him about heaven and he would look at me with sad eyes. I didn’t know what his look meant then, but I recognize it now as him wishing he believed in one.

#### THE FIRST GRANDPA TO DIE

My mom’s parents moved to our bigger small town after my grandpa had a heart attack in a town without a hospital. They lived in the middle of western Kansas, in a town with one grocery store and one donut shop and one gas station but no hospital. They lived so far away from any other town that he had another one in a helicopter over a yellow field of nothing. When he lived through it they moved to where my mom had met my dad and then stayed: a bigger small town.

He had his third heart attack in his bigger home, in his new town where he didn’t have his friends and never went fishing, and we drove him to the hospital four blocks away. I stared at his cowboy boots from the hall while they hooked him up to machines.

In the years between his third heart attack and his stroke he switched to wearing slippers only. He stopped smoking and got fatter. In the hospital hall when I was older and so was he, I stared at his slippers while they hooked him up to machines.

What I remember about their old house most is that the tap water tasted very old, like water by your bedside that sits out for three days and then you accidentally drink it. In



my memory there is a gold chandelier, which hung in the master bedroom; there is my grandpa and I sneaking to the brown kitchen for midnight ice cream; there is the den that's filled with cigarette smoke and VHS tapes and brown and green furniture and brown and green blankets; and there's the water that tasted so old, tasted to me like western Kansas.

My grandma sits around now and coughs up remnants of that smoked-filled den. In the last years of his life, sitting around a town he never got a chance to get to know, he rubbed a lifeless hand on his cane so much that it became hand-polished, bright. Right before he died, the wood looked brand new at the curve of it.

## ABANDONED

The night before I left home forever I slept on my bedroom floor with blankets because there were suitcases stacked on top of my bed and it was made so nicely and already not mine. I left town before he did. I told him I loved him but not enough to date him from ten hours away. He helped me fit everything I would take in my car the night before and then didn't come back in the morning.

I broke up with the first person I loved in an alley on the other side of his shed so that his mother couldn't see us through the window of her house. He cried a lot and I cried a little. There was a large loud box fan blowing around dusty air inside the shed. He told me to sit with him for a while. There was furniture shoved places where furniture doesn't go—one couch in front of another. There was one small window, on the side opposite of his house, covered with a sheet—spiders crawled up and down the sill all

spring and summer—and it was just large enough for us to shove a case of beer through from the outside. We did this all through high school but not on this night.

There was our silence. I kept grabbing for hair that wasn't there anymore because I had just cut it short. I played with my hair when there was nothing else to hold, and then it wasn't there. His record player was playing, something like Paul McCartney or Freddy Mercury—something soft and crackling and distantly familiar, something from way before him and I's time.

We promised we'd never say things like, "how is the family?" We shook on it, spit into our palms.

On the long stretch of highway facing the sun towards what my dad said would be the best years of my life, I listened to Christian-talk radio and static. I followed my dad's truck with my car and we stopped only once for a fast-food breakfast.

My new roommate had both parents there, arguing softly about the placement of things and how much cash to leave with her. They took pictures: the family, together, on moving day; her and I's first day together. My mom had stayed home. My dad was efficient: he pushed and pulled things in, took me out for a burger, told me he was leaving my mother when he got back home and then left.

Instead of going to all the organized new-freshman things, my new roommate and I scrubbed our dorm floor with paper towels. We did our best to cover gray, cement walls with the poster we brought. I didn't know her yet but I cried and she didn't mind and then we knew each other better.

When I was young and my parents went anywhere I thought for sure I was abandoned. I told myself they didn't love me and would never come back and planned my next move accordingly.

The bunk beds of the dorm room felt like summer camp when I fell asleep that night, but the walls in the morning—cold and with nothing much on them yet—reminded me that I was all on my own.

Years later I ran into my first boyfriend and asked about his grandma who I'd heard had cancer. Neither of us smiled at the irony of our promise because she was dying. Her husband had died years before her so she was watching her cancer spread all on her own.

## RESTAURANT WORK

It was hot water first in the porcelain coffee cup so that it felt hot to the touch and kept the coffee warmer longer—a breakfast server gets burned a lot and doesn't feel it as much—and a scoop and a half of coffee in the small French Press. I splashed the water in the sink and turned the cup over on its saucer. I brought all of it out on a cloth-covered tray, with fresh cream and sugar whether they took it or not. I pressed down, slowly, at edge of the table. I poured it for them without talking—without drawing attention to myself at all. On weekend days we'd turn each table over five times at least, the crowd at the front by the door would be hard to walk through. The cooks would put out food faster but people would wait longer because there were ten orders in the kitchen at once. My clothes would be soiled at the end of a shift and my feet always hurt.

When I met Rafael I had told him I had restaurant experience even though this was a lie. I knew that most restaurants only hire people with experience and so everyone lies at first.

Then I'd wake up at 6:00am on Sunday mornings and do it all again.

Then on Monday it was calmer.

Rafael said I had it made, in the quietness of the Monday morning after a weekend rush, when it was just me and him and Dennis, the 7am weekday regular who sat at the bar by the kitchen while I heated up my own breakfast and I poured his and my coffee. I set the honey out for him like he liked. The three of us talked almost every morning, which meant listening to the two of them talk, about what's wrong with our country and what really pisses them off.

He said what more could I ask for, "then be young pretty woman with college education." I stood over a crossword, my feet already swelling at the beginning of my shift; they were defensive, knowing I'd be on them too long.

"I don't know," I said.

This was where I met and got used to and fell in love with another person's lips, a mouth that tasted like cigarettes and hostility. It was different than the first time.

## RESURRECTION, ANOTHER SUNDAY

The sun was the same as I remember every Easter Sunday of my childhood being: me under it, dressed in yellow in the soft grass of my cousins' yard ready to Easter egg hunt, my hair in waves from braids my mother had given me the night before—it was

gentle and warm. Back when I believed in God I used to say to my dad, “Isn’t it weird that every Easter’s weather’s so perfect,” and he’d say to me back, “I remember a few that have rained.” This was my dad; he didn’t want my hopes up.

## INFIDELITY

There was a beautiful gray-haired man with nice shoes who came in nearly every day. Even though it’s not a fancy place, —we all wore the same T-shirt and our coffee was weak and our prices were low—he liked our salsa and that we brought his food out to him fast without have to talk to him much. I knew what he wanted so I never asked but I did ask the girl because the girl always changed. Not that she changed what she wanted, but that he changed the girl. There were three.

I could tell he was a good liar by the way he talked to the hairdresser about their future together. I could tell they were talking about their future by the way she leaned into him on her elbows and barely ate her eggs. I knew she had a child. I could see it in her big purses and her big sweaters and her hips. I knew she thought this man would take care of her by the way he always threw his card down before I brought him his check.

He left me big tips to keep my mouth shut about the others and it worked.

The beautiful gray-haired man had steady eyes and lips that smiled on the edge of coffee cups, all on their own. He and she drank their coffee slowly; they wanted me to fill it up and up and up. They always had a full cup sitting there when they left. In the winter, especially, they liked just to have something warm to hold.

## WHEAT

The grills of my father's two semis were above my head and pushing hot musky air out as I ran between them. It smelled like diesel and motor oil and dust, even with the handkerchief tied around my head, over my nose and mouth, like my father's. He was parking them both under a building on our farm and I was his help. The wheat and I were the exact same height, although when I measured with my hand I was taller. My dad said my hair was its exact color; he put his hand on my head, messing it up. He had told me before not to ever get in between two running vehicles, ever, but I knew the truth was we were all in the middle of a million.

He grabbed me and said, "No running in between."

I was not old enough then to know that the smells of my father were dust and sweat and weed, all I knew was that the smell of him was both earthy and sweet and that it made me feel safe when I hugged my face into his neck, even when he said, "No hugs, no hugs." When he said, "I'm all dirty."

It was the cooler end of summer, before school had started, My dad used to let me go out to fields with him, carry a hammer or a wrench in the loop in my jeans, wear work gloves that came up to my forearms, pretend I was working. It was one of those days—windy; I had hair down to my lower back blowing sideways. In the winter it was—my mom's words—the color of an old copper penny, but then with the spring and summer the wheat and I got blonder together.

I was running away from my dad, running hard, elbows pumping, once we got back to the field and were heading back to his truck. He was standing still, back by the tractor, watching. We were racing. He was letting me win. We were close to a highway,

at the edge of a field; I could hear the whistle of cars going by, louder as they came, softer as they left. My dad started to run to catch up to me, and a man was in front of me suddenly, making me yell—a man who was all belly and two large hands.

I said, “Stop it, I’m winning.”

I know which field it was even, because across the highway from it there was and still are large stones that spell out the name of our town.

My dad’s voice was louder—coming up from behind me—than I may have ever heard it.

“Hey!” he yelled.

I remember the man’s long car by the side of the highway; his big stomach, eye level with me; his two large hands on my two smaller shoulders, him letting go when he saw my dad’s face, or heard his voice. I remember my dad and me in his truck on the way back to the house, quiet. My legs itched from the wheat.

I understood then that the man thought something was going on that wasn’t, but I didn’t quite know what it was. It was years later that it came to me; it came to me vivid and sudden like two large hands—they say *out of nowhere*—but I know what it was. It was the smell of a field of wheat in the late summer before fall, it was the sound of an old ford engine idling by the highway, and other cars whistling by—I realized that the man with the belly in my memory thought my dad was chasing me, that he thought we were strangers. It must have been only until he could see our wheat-colored hair, the look in our eyes.

## THE SECOND GRANDPA'S PASSING

My second grandpa's funeral was in a small stone church. It was full to the aisles of black-suited people and their strangely still children. The crowd was quiet enough, even by the hundreds, even walking out, that I could hear skateboards on pavements a block and a half away. I could hear their wheels, their catcalls, their dares, their gum.

At the funeral my father was the only one wearing jeans and he and I stood as far back as the family could stand and still be the family. He and I are the same in this way—expressionless and separate. My Aunt and I had dug through pictures for the reception and couldn't find a single picture of the two of them together, even though they worked together for the last fifty years. There was a picture of him with everyone else besides with my dad because no one ever took one.

When he sensed it coming, for no reason we could see—he was just as healthy as all of us—he told my Aunt the hymns and epigraphs he wanted at his funeral, sat her down in her office because this is part of her job at the church. He called my house on a chilly afternoon when I was in town visiting my mother and asked if I'd go out for coffee—in the afternoon and black, a thing we had in common—and told me a little about the brevity of life: "it really passes you by." That spring, he began to build a gazebo, which he had either long thought of or thought of on a whim when my cousin announced her engagement.

The morning he died, building it, from bad luck and a tree limb, I was three hours away in school again but got on the highway an hour later and headed back through the flint hills for my dad's house.



When I got to his door, his new wife was baking something and looking appropriately solemn. He was stoned and in his socks. He told it all from his vantage, told it several times. The truck backed into the tree branch and my dad saw it coming, knew it would happen in the seconds before; he yelled at the driver to stop, stop, stop, stop.

Both my grandmas are alive and both my grandpas are dead. Both of their funerals were just a little bit bigger than the churches would hold. People stood along the aisles during both; my grandmas, both, were dry-eyed. I held both of their small hands after. I rode with both of them home.

I didn't cry until much later and this is what did it.

My dad telling me the way he'd always imagined it being: him sixty and his dad ninety, somewhere far out by themselves, maybe in a field without reception, maybe on a tractor with it moving—for whatever reason, in his mind's eye, my dad is having to drag him back to a truck and it takes all his strength—a solid body of muscle and everything stern. Both men have been kicked in the gut by a bull and kept working. He tells this story in facts: this was what he saw and it didn't happen this way.

My mom telling me that when they were first married, every early dark morning, all through fall, winter, spring, summer, my dad answered the phone by his bed and listened to orders, still under covers. All she heard was his side: “Yes, Ok, Yeah...Ok...Ok...Ok.”

I asked that grandma how she's been doing without him. She lives in the country alone now after sixty years of being married. She said, "I can read in bed with the light on, as late as I want to."

## OTHER LOVES

And his face was scratchier than any face I had kissed and sarcasm came out of it, always. And he told me I had an old soul. And he told me I had a beautiful body. And he told me I thought too much. And he kissed someone else. He told me he didn't believe in love, and then when I refused to believe him, he proved it.

## THE SNAKE

My uncle, with his cane—my mom asks him because he's a man and has a cane and is her brother, to please knock the snake off the fence, over to the neighbor's yard, so that it won't slide into hers—can make a noise which means I'm not going to move, or answer, and I don't have to say why, and you will all forgive me. It's a grunt. I see it first; it makes an S shape up toward a branch that is our branch and not our neighbor's branch. My mom says something like "oh god" and asks him, her brother, to knock it off the fence and he makes that noise. The snake is double the girth of his cane and maybe as long.

My grandma, whose hand trembles bad now, from what her doctor has said must be early-onset Parkinson's by way of deduction, has stopped holding her shaky hand because it only makes both hands shake instead of both being still, and she—my grandma—otherwise so still, worried but still. My mom leaves to the front yard and

comes back; she says that the man who we called “the corner man” when I was young, and now that I am grown she still calls “the corner man,” wanted to show her a dead bird that he found. He had rung the doorbell an hour ago asking for work. I thought all those years growing up that because he stopped at corners, skittish, and turned back, he had been in some war. I knew what war was, I knew what PTSD was, and I knew what poverty was, only in the abstract. He was old to me then and looks the same to me now. I have grown, taller mostly. But now my dad will tell me, days later, over breakfast, that it was just a frying pan and no war.

“No,” he will say, “His wife hit him with a frying pan from behind.”

If one wants to see my father ever, they have to be willing and ready for breakfast at dawn. He will tell me that he became—my dad's word—confused, started to walk around town. I will ask, “Did he deserve it?” And he will say, “Who deserves it?” But that's later; this is now.

My mom and I serve a plate of hotdogs, potato salad, potato chips, not because we are the women but because we are the only ones of the party who can walk and use our hands at the same time. We serve them in the back yard to my uncle and my grandma with the snake there and all. The corner man out front with the dead bird, sweeping up leaves so that my mom will give him dollars. Before my hotdog I glance up toward the fence and see where its whole body was before is now only half, the first half lost in the leaves of our tree. My mom is worried for her two dogs, which are small and defenseless.

I am back home, usually because of a funeral or break-up, but this time for my grandma—“it's bothersome,” she says about her hand when I ask—and also because I'm

low on money and out of a job. I quit when it happened: her hand, his back. I saw them whisper together. I felt it before I saw it. I saw it and left.

My mom has began saying things like, “before I die, I'd like a stone patio; before I die, I'd like to find your grade school pictures and put them in a book,” when it used to be only, “I was thinking I'd like a stone patio, a screened-in porch,” “I was thinking I'd like to visit Paris.” I guess once your mother's hand begins to shake there's a feeling of being next.

My dad, whose father recently died, dreams of him, but in the dream he knows he's dead. In the dream his father is still telling him what to do on their farm, and he, my father, thinks, you are dead. I will tell him, days later, over breakfast, that this is close to lucid dreaming. I will tell him, “at that point, once you recognize the flaw, you may begin to take the dream where you wish, but you need the recognition first, and then practice.” He will look at me. He will not see the novelty in this. He will say, “I let my dreams go where they go.” But that's later, and this is now.

We're sitting outside this afternoon—my uncle, grandma, the corner man, the snake, my mother—because it's dropped to 80 in August, and so in the shade feels like God may still love us. The occasion is me, the occasion for my uncle hobbling over from the efficiency he lives in, retrieving my grandma from her assisted-living she lives in—where she has no one to talk to because she's the youngest at 82, the brightest by miles. The two of them get mistaken for a married couple in public because my uncle is so aged from drinking.

They each stare at me in silences, like I am some mysterious creature, not likely dangerous but not predictable either, gliding back and away whenever I please. They look

at me, suspiciously, like I am something out of place. They are wide-eyed, expectant. The yard fades darker and this will make it harder for my grandma to walk. They ask how long I plan to be around and I tell them I don't know. They comment on the weather, which is, everyone agrees, nice; they compliment the food to my mom, which is, everyone agrees, good. They look back up for the snake, all of them, which is gone.